

# Persecution of Christians in a Somali Context

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## Introduction

The ethnic Somali inhabited area in the Horn of Africa is presumably the largest geographical area inhabited by a single people group in Africa. It covers most of the three adjoining political units of Somalia, Somaliland and Djibouti, in addition to large areas of eastern Ethiopia and northeastern Kenya. The region has for centuries been subject to prevailing frictions between the Muslim Somali population and their Christian neighbors. Professor Said S. Samatar describes this relationship accordingly: "Somali Islam is a frontier Islam, hemmed in on all sides by pagan and Christian interlopers. Characteristically, frontier Islam is bellicose, xenophobic and profoundly suspicious of alien influences."<sup>1</sup> Christian Somalis, although few and scattered, thus carry with them a difficult heritage pertaining to cultural and religious representation. Despite more than a hundred years of Protestant missionary efforts, the growth of the church in this area has been slow and the present number of evangelical Christian Somalis in the Horn of Africa presumably does not exceed a few hundred. This little group of believers constitutes a culturally marginalized and persecuted minority, and the story of the Christian church among the Somalis represents a story of unnamed struggles and sufferings.

During eight years, from 1999-2008, I served as a missionary with the Norwegian Lutheran Mission in southeastern Ethio-

pia, involved in work among the Somali population. During the years of 2007-2008, I interviewed fourteen Christian Somalis about their congregational experiences in this context.<sup>2</sup> These in-depth qualitative interviews have constituted the primary material of my PhD dissertation.<sup>3</sup> The article at hand is an abbreviated version of parts of a chapter from my PhD thesis, focusing on experiences of persecution in this particular context.<sup>4</sup>

In the subsequent I will present a small part of this material. The section, *Experiences of Religious Persecution*, gives an overview of the various types of persecution the informants have faced. *Agents of Persecution* focuses on the various actors carrying out such persecution, while *Discernible Consequences of Persecution* presents a summary of consequences deductible from the empirical material and seeks to give a brief contextual analysis of what impact these experiences have made on Somali Christians and the Somali Christian congregations as such.<sup>5</sup> I will, however, start with a short definition of how I apprehend the concept of persecution.

### **What is Persecution?**

Persecution is a concept which is employed in different contexts and often with somewhat differing connotations. In the subsequent, I utilize a definition of persecution which is introduced by Glenn M. Penner. Persecution is here defined as a situation where "Christians are repetitively, persistently and systematically inflicted with grave or serious suffering or harm and deprived of (or significantly threatened with deprivation of) their basic human rights because of a difference that comes from being a Christian that the persecutor will not tolerate."<sup>6</sup> A challenge with regard to persecution as a subject matter is the fact that reasons for persecution often are composite, and religious affiliations only constitute one of several aspects provoking it. I concur with the approach employed by Paul Marshall pertaining to this subject. He demarcates religious persecution by raising the issue of whether "some or all of the oppression and discrimination that people suffer would occur if they were of a different religion."<sup>7</sup> In our case it is therefore productive to ask whether or not it is likely that the oppression and discriminati-

on experienced by Somali Christians would have occurred if they had remained Muslims. Only if the answer to that question is negative will it be treated as persecution in the following.

### **Experiences of Religious Persecution**

#### *Cultural Ostracism and Marginalization*

Experiences of community ostracism and marginalization may often be considered less severe by outsiders. Nonetheless, consequences of cultural marginalization carry a substantial destructive potential for the individual being subject to it. This is particularly the case pertaining to a traditionally kinship based and interdependent community, such as the Somali. My informant Hassan explains this by contrasting the situation of Christians to that of low-caste groups in Somali society.

[...] They are despised. So, now the Somali Christians are even worse than that. Those people, they still associate with them. They don't marry, but they still go together in the mosque, they still greet each other, they still may sometimes help each other. But the Somali Christians are even farther than that. You cannot marry, you cannot...I mean...you are totally out. And that is very difficult.

Such low-caste groups have been systematically discriminated against culturally through centuries. Hassan and others considers it in various ways to be more culturally incriminating to be identified as a Christian than to belong to one of the outcast groups. This is exemplified by the fact that there are rules of social interaction which encompass outcast groups, while similar structures do not exist with regard to Somali Christians. They are categorized among infidels and are thus not accepted as full members of the society. Although Hassan and others repeatedly reassures that they find comfort and blessing in the Christian faith, the informants draw attention to a variety of factors which jointly generate an atmosphere of social isolation for them. These include parallels to outcast groups, community dislike, loss of support from friends and family, loss of honor, loss of "somaliness," loss of accept, loss of respect, loss of friendships, loss of genuine family "membership," loss of encourage-

ment and their being subject to regular insults, particularly through rude and unkind words. Hassan is presently residing in an area where he is subject to a certain legal protection from the government, limiting the danger of harsher forms of persecution. He nevertheless experiences continuous community harassment and ostracism. This form of persecution is to various extents experienced by all the Somali informants who are known to be Christians in their community.

The informant named Ahmed epitomizes the situation in a rather simple and straightforward manner, "I am Somali. If I talk to another Somali, and he knows that I am a Christian, then he will stay away from me. He doesn't want to have anything to do with a Christian."<sup>8</sup> All the Somali informants give a corresponding witness of cultural ostracism and marginalization. Hence, the informants jointly paint a picture where Somalis converting to Christianity inevitably are assigned predefined roles, categorizing them as cultural outsiders.

### *Accusations, Oral Threats and Physical Abuse*

Intersected with the material presented in the preceding, are experiences of initial oral threats which often have developed into various forms of physical abuse.<sup>9</sup> Many Christians have remained secret believers, but all the interviewees who have informed their families and relatives of their Christian conversion have faced various forms of incrimination, oral threats and physical abuse.

Accusations promoted by individuals and groups in the communities have often been of two different types. They have either been directed towards questioning the loyalty and true "somaliness" of Christian Somalis, or they have been pernicious accusations of a religious character, particularly stressing features related to Islam. Both these categories of incrimination have apparently had a particularly destructive effect on the Christians. Accusations of a kind that question the loyalty, or in other ways discredit the believers with regard to their true Somali cultural representation, affect a cultural pride which is regarded as a particular characteristic of Somali culture.<sup>10</sup> Thus, these kinds of accusations, although from an etic perspective of lesser severity than, for instance, physical abuse, continue to constitute an

austere challenge for the individual Somali confessing Christianity.

The second type of accusations is of a somewhat different character. These are charges claiming that the Christian Somalis discredit the majority Muslim religion. My informant Nuur has experienced the malignance and potential damage vested in such accusations. I asked Nuur if he had the protection of his clan if someone would try to harm him. Referring to an earlier episode, when he was falsely accused of tearing pages from the Quran and throwing them into the toilet, he replied,

It depends on what kind of problem. If it is a problem like I have thrown copies of the Quran into the toilet, even my clan will pull off not to be involved because they are not sure whether I have done it or not. [...] If it is a religious issue, sometimes they can look at me as a common enemy. It is politics you know. From the different parties, we look at something else if we want to be united. If I want to be united with you, we look for a common enemy.

Accusations leading to an individual losing protection from his clan in majority Somali inhabited areas are potentially highly damaging, as the individual in such cases becomes socially vulnerable and loses community protection. Several informants accentuate related issues, pertaining to Muslim religious authorities and the pressure being put on them from religious institutions.

Serious threats of consequences such as physical abuse and murder, unless individuals turn back to Islam, are also among the more common reactions experienced by the Somali Christians. Hassan experiences such treats regularly.

One time even stoning happened. Even people...a man slapped me...we came together and talked. We talked about Christianity and Islam and he got angry. They were three...here in [*name of place*]. One tried to beat me up, and the other two held me back. So he hit me. [...] He was saying, "This guy is a gaal." Gaal is infidel. They came to me. They harassed me. They tried to threaten me...because I had

disowned or left Islam. "The consequence is that you have to be killed. You know that," and so on...Several times he harassed me and insulted me and threatened me. It happens. It is part of...now I...the first times it was hard for me, but now I am adapted. So if they say...it is okay. Especially there is a man who is very close to where we live and always he says: "Are you still alive?"

Let me finally include the witness of my informant Ali who emphasized that physical abuse is something to be expected by Somali Christians. At the time referred to in the subsequent quote, Ali had recently become a Christian. He was not prepared for the reactions he was to face. After these experiences, he has taken refuge in a "safer" area.

And we were going out to the town up to where the Somalis are selling the khat and something like that. And we were testimonying. We were witnessing to them, "Receive Jesus Christ and you will be saved," in Somali language. Can you imagine, in a Somali town, a Somali man witnessing about Jesus Christ by the Somali language? [...] Many days, I met danger. I met danger, great, great danger, really. God protected me, but I was near to die. They shot me with a bullet. They tried to stab me with a knife. They beat me many times with a stone. They boxed me. They insulted me. They spat on my face. They kicked me. They did whatever they could. But God protected me. Even they looked for me to kill me. Many days and months really...really... But it is the Lord...I thank the Lord whenever I remember this...but that's not wisdom. That's foolishness. We did a great mistake. So I made a great problem there.

Ali realizes that for an ethnic Somali to openly witness and confess Christianity may in many contexts not only be unwise but can be life threatening. As can be concluded from these narratives, various forms of accusations, threats and physical abuse are commonly experienced by Somali Christians and to varying degrees they are considered inescapable consequences of embracing Christianity.

*Community Pressure on Family and Children*

The compound subject matter encompassing marriage and family life is recurring in the informants' accounts of both experienced and anticipated challenges. One of the issues raised is related to the actual process and possible prospects of finding a spouse. Historically, a significant majority of those confessing Christianity in this context have been men, and Christian families have accordingly been rare.<sup>11</sup> Those who have already established families are also subject to a considerable pressure from both relatives and other community members. Let us listen to the witness of Sayid, a family father residing at present in an area offering formal government protection for Christians.

What is most difficult...first you have discrimination. You have discrimination and harassment and abuse, even stoning. Sometimes people from our Muslim community background even try to take our wives and children by force [...]. What the Muslims believe is that anyone that becomes a Christian must die. They must kill him. Who should kill him? His brother, his sister, his uncle...Even, the community takes your heritage...your clan and those who are close they take your heritage. If you have a farm or houses, they will take it. Leave other people, even young children they cannot play with the other Muslim children. They are abusing them. Last year...my son is twelve years and the other Somali Muslim children beat him. On Sundays they go to church, and the children ask them, "Why are you going to church? Why don't you pray in the mosque?" They started to fight each other and broke his arm. It is difficult...

Sayid identifies two different issues of relevance to the family life of Christian Somalis. On the one hand, relatives of one of the spouses may decide to interfere and take a spouse or children away from the convert by means of force. On the other hand, Christian families and their children are exposed to a considerable external pressure. With regard to the former of these assertions, it is substantiated by other informants. From personal experience, I have often heard a similar contention and we may conclude that such a fear unquestionably exists. I

have however not found that any of my informants have actually experienced this.

### *Loss of Rights and Opportunities*

An inherent consequence of the cultural ostracism that Somali Christians experience is a general loss of both formal rights and informal opportunities. By informal opportunities, I here mean opportunities that would have been available had they remained Muslims. The three majority Somali inhabited national entities on the Horn of Africa – Somalia, Somaliland and Djibouti respectively –, have all formally established Islam as the official religion. Large parts of southern Somalia have during later years further been governed by radical interpretations of Sharia law, enforced by the main militant Islamist group, Al-shaabaab. In areas under their control religiously motivated violence has been widespread, and executions of those accused of being apostates from Islam have been frequent during the last few years.<sup>12</sup> The constitution of Somaliland further states that Muslims cannot renounce Islam, and promoting any religion but Islam is strictly prohibited. Although Islam is the sole state religion also in Djibouti, the constitution here protects the right to practice any religion. The Family Code however, prohibits marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men. The UNHCR emphasizes that although individuals have a legal right to leave Islam, converts must be prepared to face negative reactions from society, clan and family. Social hostility towards non-Muslims has been increasing during later years.<sup>13</sup>

Since conversion from Islam is prohibited in Somalia and Somaliland, Christian Somalis are generally deprived of legal rights in these areas. They will therefore normally keep a very low profile, or remain secret believers while residing there. Informants emphasize for instance, that, since Muslims according to the Somaliland constitution are prohibited from changing their religion, the only way for former Muslims to obtain a Somaliland citizenship and passport would be to recant their faith and formally be considered Muslims. They further add that as Christians they do not have any rights with regard to inheritance, and thus they are often considerably weakened financially.



Sayid, who lives in an area where he is subject to formal legal protection, has found that the law cannot protect him with regard to loss of opportunities. He used to run his own business before he became a Christian. When it became known in the community that he had left Islam, most Muslim Somalis disassociated from him.

Even if I want to work with the Somalis they refuse. They say, "No. If you want to work with us you must repent back to Islam." Since I became a Christian I have not worked anymore. Someone who has a small shop or someone who is a tailor, they refuse them in the community. They cannot work anymore.

According to Sayid the cultural ostracism frequently experienced by Somali Christians may deprive them of basic opportunities to make a living. This may even be the case in areas where they otherwise have legal protection. To survive independently on their own terms, is often considered unattainable. As a consequence they remain vulnerable to community pressure, which in turn materializes in their loss of opportunities. Loss of such opportunities often becomes life restrictive with regard to such matters as financial income, personal choice and safety.<sup>14</sup>

### *Religiously Motivated Homicides*

Executions of apostates from Islam have occurred in the Somali context for years, and the reported incidents have as a rule taken place in southern Somalia. Along with growing Islamist influence in the area the frequency of reported incidents has increased considerably during the last few years. The Christian news agency, Compass Direct News reported that Islamic militants in Somalia sought out and killed at least 15 Christians during 2009.<sup>15</sup> Many of my informants have friends or acquaintances that have been murdered within the last ten years. As an example of such experiences, Hassan told about a Christian leader in one of the areas adjacent to Somalia proper.

I know some who also has been killed. I remember last year, 2007, one who was among the leaders, who used to go to

the [*name of church*]...in the fellowship he was committed. He used to come to this fellowship. He went back to Somalia and immediately he was killed. He was called "Farah." And I remember that...he was...yeah.

As travelling across the region is widespread, Somali Christians are particularly vulnerable when crossing into areas where they may lack loyal protection from their kinsmen as well as legal protection from governments. This is particularly the case with regard to those Christian Somalis who are known in their surroundings to be confessing Christians. However, attempted murders have also occurred in other areas.<sup>16</sup> Several informants anticipate that religiously motivated homicides may occur throughout the region. They assume, however, that in some cases homicides will not be carried out openly, but may be concealed as accidental deaths.

### *The Complexity of Circumstances – Some Qualifications*

Although informants have drawn attention to multifarious experiences of religious persecution, leaving no doubts as to the frequency and regularity of such events, the overall picture is nevertheless more compound and thus needs to be qualified. Nuur is one of the few openly confessing Christians who has chosen to remain with his family within his local Somali community. Some years back, facing persecution, he chose to take refuge abroad. Having gone through this process, he is however stating that Christian Somalis, as far as possible, need to remain in their communities.

But when you are living among your own people like in [*name of place*] now, every day I meet Somalis. Day to day, I meet them. You know what they tell me? "[Nuur] you are a good man. You do not run away when you are persecuted." Of course I have gone, but finally I came. You don't run away, that is one thing. And one thing is that you are part of the clan. You are Somali. They tell me, "You are Somali" because I help in development projects. I am with them. When they are in problems, I know. I am still with them. When there is hostility, I am still with them. So they say that,

“We know you are our clan. You are our man, our family member and in everything you belong to us [...]. They don’t see me as somebody who has lost his identity because I dress like them, I go to hotels, I drink tea with them. They buy for me or I buy for them in the hotel. We talk the language. I don’t say “Hallelujah, Praise the Lord,” when I am greeting them. Then I would look like a foreigner. I keep all the Somali like “Insha Allah.” I make Somali proverbs, Somali sayings, Somali jokes. I visit them, they visit me. We drink tea; we sit on the mat [...]. One thing is that you should never encourage believers to run. You should encourage them to stay...to stay in their locality.

Nuur has found that by associating with his local community, and being in a position to contribute financially, it is possible for him and his family to remain and to some extent gain the respect of his fellow countrymen. This was however an experience made after having spent several years outside of this local context. Consequently Nuur acknowledges that the pressure on Christian converts may force individuals to leave. He nevertheless emphasizes a need for Christians to return and accept a certain level of persecution. My informant Hussein has made similar experiences. He feared for his life and decided to flee. After many years abroad, the hostility towards him in his local environment had decreased, and it was eventually possible for him to return to his family as a confessing Christian. Hussein concludes that being separated from his local context probably was necessary in order for the family to accept him as a Christian.

My informant Adan explains that families of Christian converts will often feel compelled to take action one way or another. Forcing the converts to leave the area quietly may be the better choice, as they may otherwise have to involve Muslim religious authorities, or will fear the consequences when other relatives are informed. The pattern, however, seems to be that when the families have demonstrated to the community beyond doubt that they have done everything possible to turn the Christian convert back to Islam, but in vain, the convert may quietly return. As long as he/ she keeps a low profile and

desists from challenging or provoking animosity in the community, the Christian convert may gain a level of acceptance despite their divergent faith. The loyalty and protection of their clansmen may, however, be limited, particularly at an early stage. According to several informants, the clan loyalty, and accordingly also the community acceptance, tends to be inter-related with the converts' status, particularly with regard to finances. If the Christian convert is considered to be financially beneficial to the community and his/ her family, community loyalty and protection grows. Nuur, for instance, considers that he has been able to strengthen his position in the society because he works with a non-governmental organization and has been able to generate public benefits through aid and development activities. Dependent members of the community will presumably be more vulnerable. Nonetheless, even individuals like Nuur remain vulnerable.

The oral material presented in the preceding has demonstrated that suffering and persecution has constituted the normal lot for Somali converts to Christianity in the Somali region. The actual forms of persecution may commonly differ from reactions such as cultural ostracism, where Christians are inevitably imparted predefined roles of cultural marginalization, to various forms of accusations, threats, loss of opportunities and physical abuses. Somali Christian families, although still rare, are continuously subject to external pressure and mistreatment. Conclusively, any Somali who chooses to confess Christianity will expectedly be subject to similar reactions. Depending on the context, a few individuals have however managed to remain in the Muslim majority areas, where they have been able to endure although they are recognized to be Christians.

### *Agents of Persecution*

Several different agents of persecution have historically often been identified in persecution contexts. When the number of agents and institutions involved in persecution increases, the level of persecution is characteristically considered more severe.<sup>17</sup>

My informants likewise identify several such agents, representing different institutions of society. *Government institutions*

at various levels have been agents of persecution also in areas where converts to Christianity formally are subjected to legal protection from religious discrimination. *Muslim religious leaders* are frequently mentioned by the informants as agents of persecution. Hassan explains this in a few words based on personal experience, "It was when I came to [*name of place*] that my mother heard that I had become a Christian. And my mother mobilized some uncles, some religious men, with a big beard. Then they tried to change me again...the persecution started." Several of my informants also describe the fear they harbor with regard to individuals who may inform the mosques and Muslim religious authorities about Christian congregational activity. The third group of agents is identified as *influential representatives of the local community*. This is often a composite and somewhat indefinable group, depending on the specific context which the Christian convert inhabits. The group often consists of such individuals as clan elders, devoted Muslims, neighbors and/ or kinsmen of the Christian converts.

A final group of agents of persecution acknowledged by my informants is constituted *by family and close relatives*. My informant Sayid explains that close, but not immediate, relatives of Christian converts often are among the most zealous persecutors. He asserts that relatives such as cousins or second cousins often are expected to take action against the so-called religious aberration of individuals. Although they are close relatives, they are not as emotionally attached to the Christian convert as his or her immediate family. Hence, mistreatment carried out by such relatives may be of a particularly harsh character. Several informants have, however, also been subject to severe mistreatment by the immediate or nuclear family.

These four different agents of persecution jointly make up a formidable challenge to Somali Christian converts. Since the agents of persecution represent different layers of society, the threat of persecution permeates the contexts in which they live their everyday lives. As such, the Somali context differs from many other contexts of persecution where e.g. the state is the main persecutor. Rather than being a top-down form of persecution, the Somali context represents a merger of both top-down and bottom-up persecution. As a consequence, a degree of safe space becomes a scarcity for these individuals.

### Discernible Consequences of Persecution

The persisting and widespread experience of persecution among Somali Christians has had manifest consequences discernible both in the lives of individuals and the Christian congregations as such. An explicit *sense of anxiety* and *fear of exposure* towards the wider Somali Muslim environment is widespread, and the number of Somali Christians who openly profess their Christian faith is accordingly limited. Hence, although some Somali Christians are bold witnesses of their Christian faith, a considerable number of Somali Christians are to various extents *secret believers*. Some are known by close family and relatives to be confessing Christians, but not by the community in general. Somali Christian congregations are therefore as a rule not known or acknowledged in the local communities where they exist. The fellowships accordingly risk becoming *introvert* and *secluded* groups, since they are being isolated from their surroundings or even isolate themselves, because of constant fear. Hence, even in those areas where the Christians are subject to formal government protection, and presumably are protected against the harsher forms of physical persecution, they often remain in a state of anxiety, and the Christian fellowships continue to be secluded and to some extent remain *closed to outsiders*. In many areas, secretly meeting for Christian worship may be the only possibility for such a group to survive.

Some of the Somali Christians have for fear of exposure chosen to *refrain from establishing Christian fellowships* all together. Others have for security concerns chosen *not to participate* in small groups that have been established. Whereas some remain secret believers it has become a customary pattern for confessing Christians in many areas to *flee their district of residence*. A considerable percentage of Somalis confessing Christianity have thus taken refuge in adjacent areas, where religious freedom and government protection formally exists. Nevertheless, community pressure against Somalis confessing Christianity remains also in such areas.

*The Dynamics of Center and Periphery in Somali Culture and the Impact on Somali Christian Representation*

A center – periphery model has historically been developed within the field of economic geography.<sup>18</sup> Øyvind Eide and others have, however, successfully employed a similar model when analyzing structures of dominance and power relations within a delimited cultural space, encompassing a wider substance than mere financial interrelations.<sup>19</sup> Various scholars who are familiar with the Somali context have in different ways identified a center or centers of domination and influence in Somali society. Ancient Somali narratives have contributed towards establishing a cultural center, based mainly on lineage. Through centuries an understanding of “somaliness” has been negotiated in a manner that constructs social boundaries excluding some groups, while including others. This is particularly articulated through the established categories of “noble” versus “non-noble” Somali groups.<sup>20</sup> Further, cultural centers are often defined by various features which are considered representatives of *continuity*.<sup>21</sup> Significant features may for instance be identified as the importance of mastering Somali language and poetry, participation in traditional political structures, proficiency pertaining to a pastoral way of living, identification within the complex clan structure and the Somali myth of descent, as well as religious affiliation. Financial position is also considered to be significant. Territorial location is interrelated with these aspects in various ways, to the extent that language and tradition can be maintained, but historically also the concept of a cultural center has been intertwined with geography. Hence, areas of multi-ethnicity and multi-religiosity tend to represent a movement towards cultural periphery.

Although cultural center or centers are not clear cut or readily definable, the center or centers represent privilege with regard to possibilities of the individual for acquiring influence, honor and respect in society. This is particularly the case pertaining to the dominant lineage-based narrative. It embraces an interpretation of Somali society as essentially *homogeneous*, “with a core cultural center upon which the notion and the boundary of *Somaliness* is measured.”<sup>22</sup> Although the position of a person in society to some extent is defined at birth by des-



cent, a considerable mobility with regard to emplacement within this dynamics of center and periphery remains.

Somalis embracing Christianity in various aspects are often *forced away* from a core cultural center, towards a *cultural periphery*. The very act of opting for departure from traditionally accepted religious interpretations is inherently a movement away from a sphere of honor and influence. As such the individual's Christian conviction leads to a deliberate religious choice which pulls one away from a cultural center. With regard to several other foundational aspects, Christian Somalis choose, or feel compelled, to take refuge in a cultural periphery. As demonstrated in the preceding, to remain geographically in a majority Somali inhabited area may be life threatening, particularly during the first few years after conversion. Individuals closer to a cultural center will often consider it their responsibility to safeguard tradition, and accordingly vehemently oppose unwelcomed cultural change. As Christianity is generally considered to represent foreign and uninvited religious imposition, the only viable alternatives available for Christian converts are accordingly either to remain in the community as secret believers, avoiding exposure, or to flee.

Hence, the choice of staying often means to *accept religious discrimination*, by avoiding open religious confession. Cultural marginalization and ostracism may, however, be avoided. A stronger cultural identification and pride may then be maintained, and as such community participation can be continued at a certain level, although religious identity must be subjugated. Those deciding to flee and seek refuge in "safer locations," face the opposite outcome. Personal safety and religious identity may then to a stronger degree be secured. But they will, as a consequence, move towards a cultural periphery with regard to such social activities as participation in traditional political structures, attachment to a traditionally pastoral way of living, intimate involvement with family and clan, as well as geography and religion. Thus a cultural identification in a traditional sense becomes increasingly difficult to retain. Hence those opting to flee are forced to accept a degree of *cultural marginalization* in order to obtain a minimum of religious freedom.

A further challenge for professing Christians, and the church



representing cultural marginalization, is a recognizable pattern of *self-intensification*. When individuals confess Christianity, the protection and support of family and clan most often cease, causing financial vulnerability and loss of opportunities. Hence, a considerable number of Somali Christians become refugees in neighboring countries, lacking both financial means and opportunities. Such a development continuously amplifies the experience of representing cultural margins. Thereby the process generates a vicious circle, arduous both for individuals and the church to break away from.

A similar development is interrelated with the fact that Christian Somalis struggle with establishing families, as Muslims are reluctant to marry off their sons or daughters to Christians. Christian Somalis will thus often be compelled to marry other Christians, most often representing non-ethnic Somali origin. This is a further source of potential alienation vis-à-vis the wider Somali community.<sup>23</sup> The Christian congregations often become multi ethnic communities, and as such they risk renouncing some of their distinct “somaliness.”<sup>24</sup> This substantiates the often repeated and dreaded accusation that as ethnic Somalis and Christians, they are per se disloyal and less than patriotic.

The continuous *Christian exodus* from the Somali inhabited areas further has the unfortunate side effect that it makes it increasingly difficult for Christian Somalis to remain in such areas. There are very *few role models* who have chosen to retain a presence in their local context and can exemplify to others that this is a viable option. There is accordingly no development towards normalizing the concept of “Somali Christian” and its representation in the Somali inhabited contexts. Christian Somalis who stay within the majority Somali inhabited areas thus most often remain representatives of what is apprehended as unacceptable religious aberration that should be chastised and sought removed. Hence, the Christian exodus from these areas continuously *counteracts cultural change* as well as enhanced *acceptance for religious divergence*. Many Christian Somalis accordingly find themselves in a critical position. By taking refuge abroad they fail to counteract the cultural marginalization that makes Christian Somalis suffer, and

they are not able to contribute towards the cultural change they all desire. Accordingly, there is no apparent process of change pertaining to the church's role and position in society.

### *Cultural Pragmatism and Christian Persecution*

The option to leave a context of anticipated or experienced persecution is readily understandable from *the perspective of the individual*. Conversion has provoked an emotional as well as pragmatic crisis in the life of the believer, and he/ she seeks a way to surmount the crises by generating support from the larger Christian fellowship. In the Somali case there are, however, various aspects that merge and further the opinion that leaving is the most viable option. My informant Frank, who has long lasting and intimate experience from living in the region, draws attention to the feature of *a cultural pragmatism*. He emphasizes that in many cases converts to Christianity have no real choice but to leave their place or residence. He asserts however, that the problem is more complex, and that a characteristic cultural pragmatism influences the interrelation between persecution and evacuation from potential areas of persecution.

Other times they might have in a way...you know the Somali, their mentality is "easy in, easy out," a lack of commitment, really commitment to the church. To see it established and to suffer for it. And I think maybe also there has been a lack of teaching on it, or have them study Bible passages that deal with issues like this, perseverance and division. But in...many times even the Somali nomadic mentality...if in some place the grass is not good, or if there is some problem, you just move. You don't need to solve problems, staying in one place. If there is any problem you can evade by moving, that's what you do.

As Somali Christians originate from different areas, it is difficult to generalize with regard to the level of persecution a low key Christian confession will generate. Reports of religiously motivated homicides of Christians originate as a rule from southern Somalia. The extent of persecution an individual will face in other areas will presumably vary with regard to a number of

variables. Such factors may inter alia be position in family, clan and society, financial situation, profession, age, and level of exposure. Thus, several informants voice the opinion that although the level of persecution in many contexts does not necessarily imply any real danger to their lives, a pragmatic inclination towards confronting problems in general often becomes an impetus to leave. Frank and others thus indicate that embedded cultural characteristics in this context may counteract perseverance and steadfastness in the face of suffering and persecution. In a quote introduced earlier, my informant Nuur particularly wanted to emphasize the issue that Christians as far as possible should be encouraged to remain in their local environment despite persecution. Frank argues that a conscientious and thorough reflection on biblical passages with regard to persecution and perseverance would be beneficial to Christian Somalis and the Somali church. Hence, their argument is that the Christian church among Somalis needs support towards perseverance and endurance in the face of persecution, rather than well-meant extraction from areas of oppression.

## **Conclusion**

Religious persecution has had a massive influence on the growth of Somali Christian fellowships. Imprints and reminiscences of persecution and martyrdom form a forceful constituency of the Somali church's common heritage and witness. The church among the Somali is, however, a community impressed by a culturally enhanced pride and dignity, and an element of being victimized by their fellow kinsmen has often been played down. Their persecution stories are consequently often dampened or silenced. Their fears and anticipations are likewise often not openly expressed.

Persecution and martyrdom has apparently so far not had a similar effect with regard to injecting growth and inner amalgamation among the believers as has been the case in many other contexts. The Somali church exists in an area where the only viable response to the external pressure in some instances will be to flee. Nonetheless, the growth of the church in this area is presumably conditioned by an enhanced acceptance of

suffering and persecution that may encourage more individuals to stay in, or return to, majority Muslim areas, in order to incorporate a friendly Christian presence. Such a development may also counteract an established pattern of Christianity, representing a movement towards a cultural periphery in this context. The Somali church has further a considerable challenge in counteracting a development towards becoming a silenced church, where those choosing to stay in some of the persecution contexts remain in complete secrecy. This has presumably also to some extent been the case in areas where the anticipated level of persecution is less intense.

In their painfully shared heritage and common fate, the Somali Christians possess a witness that should not be repressed, concealed or forgotten. Rather, the church needs to continue developing the psychological and theological awareness with regard to suffering, persecution and martyrdom as representing features integral to the nature of the church. In the process of developing such awareness, the Somali church may utilize the substantial New Testament body of material aiming at instilling consolation, strength and perseverance in the face of trials. The Somali Christian church as community may as such play a more active role in preparing Somali Christians for persecution. By embracing a *theologia crucis*,<sup>25</sup> a theology of the cross, both individual believers and the church can be assisted to interpret their individual and corporate sufferings within the pattern of genuine Christian discipleship.

Such a self-understanding needs, however, to be balanced with a particular sensitivity and care pertaining to the individuals' psychological and social responses in the face of persecution. The Christian community should represent mutual support and consolation aiming at joint perseverance. It is through the strength of the fellowship that the individual may also persevere. As such, scattered and solitary members of the body of Christ may potentially find support in the community of saints, based in various locations.

## Notar

- <sup>1</sup> Samatar (2002): 3.
- <sup>2</sup> I further interviewed seven expatriate missionaries with long-term experiences from working in the area. This latter material has been employed in a complementary and comparative perspective in my work. All informant names employed in the following are fictitious.
- <sup>3</sup> Thoresen (2012). The dissertation is planned to be published at Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, Bible and Theology in Africa Series.
- <sup>4</sup> Thoresen (2012): Chapter 6.
- <sup>5</sup> For constraints of time and space I have not included a wider systematic theological analysis of my findings and what implications these may have for contextual ecclesiology.
- <sup>6</sup> Penner (2004).
- <sup>7</sup> Marshall (1998): 2, 4-5. See also Marshall and Gilbert (1997): 248-251.
- <sup>8</sup> Ahmed resides in an area where a few people know that he is a Christian.
- <sup>9</sup> From personal experience, during my years of service in the area, I several times witnessed a recurring pattern of community reactions. 1. Oral threats 2. Gradually intensified corporal punishment 3. Expulsion from the family home; loss of family communion; loss of inheritance. In some rare cases spouse and children have reputedly also be removed from the convert by force.
- <sup>10</sup> Notten and MacCallum (2005): 31.
- <sup>11</sup> This attitude reflects the understanding widely consented to in the Muslim world, that although Muslim men may marry non-Muslim women, Muslim women shall never marry non-Muslim men. All the different Muslim *madhhab* (Schools of law) generally consent to such a teaching which basically is deduced from the Quran, Sure 2:221. Vogt (2005): 114. During later years the gender balance in the congregations has slowly been changing.
- <sup>12</sup> International Religious Freedom Report: Somalia (2009); Hall of Shame Report (2009): 14.
- <sup>13</sup> Djibouti: Situation and Treatment of Christians... (2009).
- <sup>14</sup> Haile and Shenk (2011): 48-50.
- <sup>15</sup> "Islamic Extremists in Somalia Kill Church Leader, Torch Home," *Compass Direct News*. <http://www.compassdirect.org/english/country/somalia/16692/> (Accessed 10.06.2010). In comparison to other sources, this is presumably a moderate estimate.
- <sup>16</sup> Ali experienced attempts of murder in an area adjacent to Somalia proper. I have also had firsthand reports of other such attempts. See also "Somalia: Christian in Kenya Refugee Camp Attacked, Shot," *International Christian Concern*. <http://www.persecution.org/suffering/newsdetail.php?newscore=9075> (Accessed 07.06.2010).
- <sup>17</sup> "The Persecuted Church" (2005): 2.1 (a). See also Nazir-Ali (1999): 58-59, as well as Marshall and Gilbert (1997): 252-253.
- <sup>18</sup> See e.g. Krugmann (1991).
- <sup>19</sup> Eide (2000).
- <sup>20</sup> Kusow (2004): 2-4.

- <sup>21</sup> Drysdale (2000): 150.
- <sup>22</sup> Kusow (2004): 11.
- <sup>23</sup> See e.g. Barnes and Boddy (1994): 300, and Laitin and Samatar (1987): 31.
- <sup>24</sup> Haile and Shenk (2011): 45.
- <sup>25</sup> Martin Luther contended that the importance and centrality of the cross, permeates theology as such. The crucifixion of Christ was not a human, but a spiritual victory. The cross thus represents a paradigm not only for individual believers, but for the collective fate of the church. On this, see Kelly (1986).

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